

White House earns plaudits for airlift

The White House won't take credit for it, or even admit that it happened. But applause is nonetheless in order for the secret U.S. operation last week that evacuated the last of the Ethiopian Jews from Sudan to Israel.

For once the Central Intelligence Agency was able to direct a clandestine mission that had a humanitarian purpose. Some 800 to 900 Ethiopian Jews stranded in Sudan were flown to Israel in U.S. Air Force transport planes.

The refugees from Ethiopia's famine had been left behind in January when publicity and the resulting outcry from other Arab nations forced Sudan to halt its cooperation with an Israeli airlift that had already ferried some 7,800 Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Sudan's President Gaafar Nimeiri, scheduled to meet with President Reagan on Monday, may have been angling for economic favors from the U.S. by allowing completion of the airlift. Since nearly 400,000 Ethiopian refugees in all have crossed into Sudan, Nimeiri obviously needs all the economic assistance he can get. Whatever his motives, we presume Nimeiri will be warmly if privately thanked by the president next week for his willingness to look the other way.

Looking the other way is what the U.S. could have done when the initial Israeli airlift was halted. Instead, the Reagan administration, using Vice President George Bush as the key contact with Nimeiri during a visit to Sudan earlier this month, picked up where Israel left off. It was the kind of American intervention we like to see.